

AIR WAR COLLEGE

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IDENTIFYING TOXIC LEADERSHIP BEHAVIORS AND TOOLS
TO FACILITATE THEIR DISCOVERY

by

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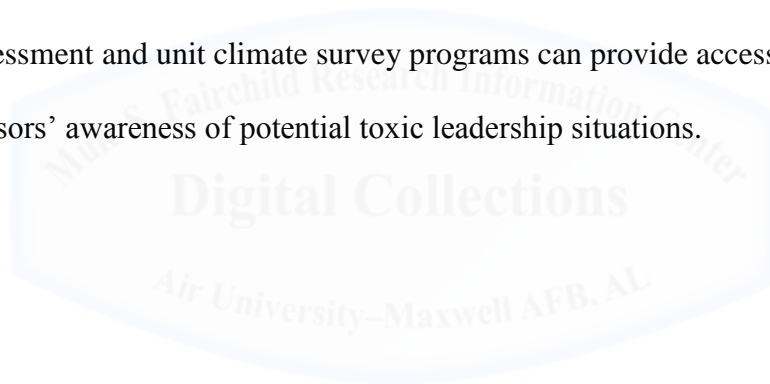
Biography

Lt Col Michael Boger is assigned to the Air War College, Air University, Maxwell AFB, Alabama. He has served as an evaluator pilot in the F-16 and AT-38, including special duty as a United States Air Force Opposition Forces Pilot (Aggressor). His significant leadership history includes assignments as the Deputy Commander of the 354th Operations Group, Commander 354th Operations Support Squadron and Deputy Director of Combat Plans for the 603d Air and Space Operations Center. Lt Col Boger has both flown combat operations in the USCENTCOM area of operations and has been a strategy development planner for operations in the USCENTCOM, USAFRICOM and USEUCOM areas of operation.



Abstract

Through a qualitative approach, both “aggressive” and “passive” toxic leadership in the United States military can be identified through specific, observable events before a unit suffers from significant mission failure, becomes destroyed or personnel are permanently damaged. A case study of toxic military leaders, and discussion aided by a focus group with over 183 years of experience, determined that the differences in passive and aggressive toxic leadership mostly lie in transparency, while the impacts and intentions of both remain the same. Toxic events or traits may be observed at the subordinate, peer and supervisory levels. A modification of the current 360-Degree Assessment and unit climate survey programs can provide access to the observable traits for supervisors’ awareness of potential toxic leadership situations.



Introduction and Method

Toxic leadership is more than “bad” leaders hurting a mission, people or future of an organization. Toxic leaders poison an organization while having impacts on sister, subordinate and superior organizations. A toxic leader causes a culture to work in survival mode, causing a systemic reduction in productivity, commitment and retention of subordinates. Even after removal or rehabilitation, a significant amount of the organization’s supervision will need to be re-trained for mission accomplishment rather than individual survival. Good personnel will leave and will not return, facing what they felt was a personally damaging organization. These long-term impacts require significant time and resources to repair. The key to eradicating toxic leadership is understanding the difference between “inept” and “toxic” leadership. Additionally, determining if toxic leadership falls into general categories of “active” and “passive” toxicity, then identifying specific observable traits and creating methods to provide this information to a senior leader. The method of describing toxicity, identifying traits and providing the information to avoid enabling toxic leadership breaks down into three research questions:

- 1) Is there a difference between indicators of passive and aggressive toxic leadership?
- 2) Can toxic leadership can be identified through specific, observable and reportable events?
- 3) What tools would help make supervisors aware of a potentially toxic leader?

Thus, through a qualitative approach, both aggressive and passive toxic leadership in the United States Military can be identified through specific, observable events before a unit suffers from significant mission failure, is destroyed or personnel are permanently damaged.

The methodology of answering the three research questions involves three processes: 1) Describing toxicity through discussing the difference between inept and toxic leaders to determine criteria for selecting Department of Defense investigations. 2) Accomplish a case study of available Freedom of Information Act released investigations for specific, observable traits relating to toxic behavior. 3) Discuss indicators and concerns in steps one and two with senior Air Force leaders. Due to their input throughout the research, understanding the makeup of the Air Force leader focus group is important.

The Air Force leaders focus group is comprised of seven retired or active duty Air Force leaders with the grades of Colonel through Major General. They were selected to provide input on the concept of toxicity in the most stressful of command environments – combat training and employment through multiple levels of leadership. Their experience includes command at numbered Air Force (groups of wings), wing (thousands of people), group (hundreds of people) and squadron level (one to two hundred people) – the primary combat unit of the Air Force. The respondents have a combined military experience of 183 years and 16 command assignments, all with direct operational ties to the preparation and employment of their units in direct active combat operations.¹ Although unintentional in their selection, all the members of this panel have experienced toxic supervisors, peers and subordinates, which will aid in validating the specific observable behaviors from the lenses of each of these positions. The application of their input includes two questionnaires with individual follow-up discussions. The input of the senior leaders helps develop recommendations of opportunities to identify and correct toxic leaders before they can become commanders, destroy their mission, their unit or permanently damage the Air Force.

Thesis

This research paper uses a qualitative approach to argue that toxic leadership, both aggressive and passive in nature, in the United States Military can be identified through specific, observable events before a unit suffers from significant mission failure, becomes destroyed or personnel are permanently damaged.



Describing Toxic Leadership

Inept Versus Toxic Leadership

George Reed, a leader in research of military toxic leadership, likens the determination of toxic leadership to how the Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart described obscenity, “I know it when I see it.”² Through describing toxic leadership rather than defining it, the understanding of toxicity will be used in selecting Department of Defense Inspector General investigations. Investigations are not labeled as toxic situations, thus the need in determining which reports indicate poor leadership skills rather than intended toxic leadership. Much academic rigor has been applied to defining toxic leadership and determining those generic traits that describe toxic leadership. Broad characteristics of narcissism and cynicism are further reduced to descriptors of selfishness, bullying, abusive behavior³, authoritarianism, and unpredictability.⁴ Much of the current research discusses the extreme of toxicity associated with the bully or aggressive toxic leader. This research process looks for reoccurring characteristics of both the bully and passive toxic leader in the quest of the first research question: Is there a difference between indicators of passive and aggressive toxic leadership? Separating out poor leadership skills from toxic behaviors will help select investigations in the case study review for the second research question.

What is the difference between an inept leader and one that is truly toxic? The Merriam-Webster online dictionary has four definitions for “toxic”⁵:

- 1) Containing or being poisonous material especially when capable of causing death or serious debilitation.
- 2) Exhibiting symptoms of infection or toxicosis.
- 3) Extremely harsh, malicious, or harmful

4) Relating to or being an asset that has lost so much value that it cannot be sold on the market.

These definitions indicate conditions that are long-term and deep rooted, resulting in the destruction of continual function. There are those leaders who are bad due to ineptitude. Inept leaders fall in the category of those persons who are not competent at leadership through irresponsibility or ignorance,⁶ including lack of skills, courage empathy or study.⁷ Although selected for a leadership position, it is their inability, not their intentions, that results in mission failure. The focus group leaders individually developed descriptions of toxic leadership, highlighting the selfish nature, the long-term (potentially permanent) impact and the subversion of a toxic leader. All of the respondents highlighted an aspect of *intent*, *transparency* and *impact* on the unit, mission or force as a whole.⁸

Intent:

- *Inept Leaders:* This includes status quo survival. They accomplish the mission with the least amount of failure or negative impact to the unit. They care, but do not know how to develop people, resources or the mission. Their poor decisions and actions are a result of lack of knowledge, wisdom, or courage, not for personal gain.
- *Toxic Leaders:* They selfishly accomplish the mission with the least amount of personal effort while gaining the most personally from it.⁹ Personal interests are above the organization, thus mission and people are means for the leader's own promotion.¹⁰ The long term function of the unit is in question, but will "look good" as long as they are in a position to receive credit for it.¹¹ They may want to be liked by both their supervisors and subordinates (concerns of popularity). Discipline

problems in the unit, mission challenges and organizational missteps are seen as weakness that must be hidden rather than addressed.

Transparency:

- *Inept Leaders:* These leaders are unable to deceive, but may inadvertently be hiding from superiors and subordinates if the resources and subordinates are accomplishing the mission and require little input from the leader. They are easy to identify when their leadership or unit's mission is challenged by any external friction that stresses unit members, processes or resources.
- *Toxic Leaders:* Toxic leaders actively hide and justify aggressiveness and failure while overstating accomplishment.¹² Subordinates do not see how leadership is done and cannot predict decisions, events or expected actions¹³. Feedback is seen as an attack from either superiors or subordinates and thus ignored while attempting to cover or hide the root issue.¹⁴ Multiple feedback sources are labeled as a threat due to the toxic leader's paranoia. Focused effort is required to identify and attribute a toxic environment to this leader. The perception of mission criticality or combat significance may overshadow some traits for a short timeframe. Actions and impacts over a timeframe will have to be recorded and consolidated to judge a toxic leader. Individual significant events, discussed later, may drive the process of recording and reviewing data that would determine toxicity.

Impact:

- *Inept Leaders:* Impact will depend on the circumstances presented during their leadership tenure. Dysfunction may be overcome by excessive resources or exceptional subordinates. Removal of the leader or significant coaching by their superior or peers on how to care about people, resources and the mission repairs the situation permanently. Development or enhancement of people, process or resources is limited but not damaging. Followers may become annoyed but are able to overcome as long as they see a form of predictability and potential for personal and mission successes. The leader's failures have not taken root in the culture of the unit.
- *Toxic Leader:* The misrepresentation that their unit can accomplish the mission may result in extreme failure at critical points. Toxicity destroys subordinate innovation, resulting in a survival mentality. The subordinates' cynicism develops to the point where they lack trust in any decisions made and the long-term retention or development of exceptional subordinates cannot occur.¹⁵ Productivity and commitment drop while turnover increases.¹⁶ Their leader's toxic behaviors generate subordinate toxic behaviors and alter the entire culture and climate of the unit.¹⁷ Inter-organizational cooperation is stifled by the discontinuity between what is promised versus what can be delivered by the toxic unit. Even after removal, supervisors will need to be retrained and manning will need to be recovered. Peer units and the greater command must overcome the infection from the toxic unit.¹⁸ There will be no fixing the loss of people who left the military as a result of toxic leadership.¹⁹

From the distinction of inept versus toxic leadership, the lens is formed through which Freedom of Information Act investigations are selected for toxic leadership traits. Within the description of toxicity, we see development of conditions of the aggressive and passive toxic leader.

Most of the publication about toxic leadership describes aggressive toxicity, leaders who communicate and direct through abuse and tyranny. The persistent abusiveness, authoritarianism, narcissism and unpredictability can be displayed in two categories of toxicity; aggressive and passive. The narcissistic or authoritarian actors are “aggressive” toxic leaders. On the other hand, there is less toxicity currently attributed to those who abuse authority through self-absorbed and unpredictable actions in a soft or “passive”, yet still self-centered manner. Both have the same intent, transparency and impact but may have different methods of detection. By understanding passive and aggressive toxic forms of leadership, the observable and reoccurring attributes found in the Department of Defense investigations will demonstrate the “obvious” aggression and the “subtle” selfishness of toxicity.

Aggressive Toxic Leadership

Aggressive toxic leadership is the characterization of abusive, intimidating treatment of subordinates. These individuals display toxicity in the traditional, ostentatious means of being a bully, abusing their role.²⁰ Bullies are characterized by Marcia Whicker as “angry, pugnacious” essentially “mad at the world and jealous of others who outperform them.”²¹ These leaders are actively abusing their position of authority over people to make their lives miserable.²² In their minds, they are justified for destroying individuals and peers for the betterment of their organization. These individuals may be enabled by misperceiving their role as the leader. The

case studies, and as noted by the focus group, describe people who have been placed in leadership roles to fix a unit's performance or "shake things up" by resorting to "sticks rather than carrots" or appropriate discipline methods.²³ How much will people who are punished for making contact communicate with this type of leader?

The focus group highlighted that the fear of providing feedback for mission enhancement or "bad" but critical news will be delayed until it is too late for an organization to overcome the situation.²⁴ The aggressive toxic leader affects people personally. In the long run, people will not tolerate being treated poorly and will eventually leave. Those departing individuals prioritize survival, which will negatively impact their new unit, or may leave the military as a whole. It may be difficult to directly attribute significant mission or retention failure to the toxic leadership climate. These leaders are maladjusted, emphasizing narcissism and authoritarianism.²⁵ The primary indicators of aggressive toxic leaders will stem from people reporting those activities or someone witnessing maltreatment.²⁶ Once identified, however, it is easier through multiple witness accounts to validate aggressive than passive toxic leadership.

Passive Toxic Leadership

The passive toxic leader abuses the role of their subordinates which generates distrust in the organization. This may include an effort to maintain their own popularity with their organization or sacrifice their organization to gain popularity with their superiors. To enhance their popularity, these leaders may fail to enforce organizational discipline in order to ensure they are not seen as the heavy handed leader. A passively toxic leader's lax requirements and preparation of an organizations for mission success may reduce subordinate workload while setting them up for failure. Conversely they may overwork their unit to unnecessarily exceed

expectations, wasting time and energy of subordinates in order to please superiors. These leaders misperceive the role of their subordinates, ranging from considering them servants to adoring fans. In both cases, prioritizing popularity with subordinates or superiors, the roles of the subordinates do not focus on the mission, they focus on the leader. Eventually, subordinates understand that they are not mission capable or that their time is not related to mission accomplishment.

Discussions in the focus group and observations in the case studies indicate that passive toxic leadership may require events, such as mission execution, exercises or metrics to expose failed preparation.²⁷ Units that were not training with the proper intensity or focus will have a rude awakening when they fail an exercise or inspection.²⁸ If discipline is not maintained, personnel will not see the benefit in personal development or enhancement. At the other extreme, leaders may cause subordinates to use time wastefully or deny time for leave and their personal lives. Unnecessarily over-exceeding requirements leads subordinates to question the predictability of a leader. In contrast to aggressive toxic behavior, acts of self-promotion and unpredictable behavior are not as self-evident and may require combined metrics that show worker compensation such as leave accrued and denied, overtime and employee retention to indicate toxic behavior.²⁹

The intimidating treatment of aggressive toxic behavior and the abuse of the subordinate roles of passive toxic behavior both impact subordinates and the mission through selfish intent, transparency and impact. The answer to the first research question is, yes, there is a difference between the indicators of passive and active toxic leadership, but there is significant overlap between the two categories. The contrast between inept and toxic leadership and the understanding of both aggressive and passive toxicity frame the types of investigations chosen

for case study of traits indicating passive and aggressive toxic leadership. With these concepts, we can now distill traits and conditions that are observable.

Observable Traits

Case Studies

The Department of Defense Inspector General maintains a database of investigations that have been previously redacted and released through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) of 1967. Twenty-three investigations specified dysfunctional organizational climates. Four of the reports had significant investigations into toxic climates. The reports selected for this case study included two Army generals, one Army senior civilian and one Air Force general. Each case shows how subordinates, peers, and superiors would observe toxic traits and potential points of interest for future methods of detecting toxicity. Two cases demonstrated aggressive toxic leadership, one showed passive toxic attributes, and one with a mix of passive and aggressive toxic attributes. This selection of cases presents observable traits along the spectrum of aggressive to passive toxic leadership as described earlier to answer our second research question: Can toxic leadership can be identified through specific, observable and reportable events?

Observable traits were considered from three perspectives; subordinates, peers and superiors. Traits from a subordinate perspective are those that can be seen in the daily activities in and around the command or office. These were selected based on the direct testimony of complainants in the cases. Traits from a peer perspective are based on testimony of personnel not directly in the chain of command and from the subject themselves. Their comments indicate traits that would come to light in peer-level interactions or meetings among peers with superiors.

Traits observable from a superior perspective are based on how the unit responded or was impacted by the toxic leader. The individual list of traits for each toxic leader are located in the appendix. The following is a short description of each toxic leadership case.

Air Force Major General Stephen D. Schmidt

Major General (MG) Stephen D. Schmidt displayed aggressive, bullying toxic leadership as the commander of a headquarters element of North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) Airborne Early Warning & Control. His unit level impacts were based on the abusive treatment, mismanagement of people's time and permanent retention in the Air Force. Members were afraid to approach MG Schmidt with bad news which enabled potential mission failures or reduction in proper resourcing, highlighting the unpredictability and authoritarianism nature of the culture he generated.³⁰ The two most immediate positions of his executive officer and aide-de-camp had been occupied by over six individuals over a one-year period.³¹ Military members were denied leave and lost accrued leave at the fiscal year turnover, destroying trust among both the members and their families, eventually resulting in quality people leaving the military.³² A subordinate who was selected early to be promoted to Lieutenant Colonel elected to retire from service as a result of his treatment by MG Schmidt.³³ This aggressive toxic leadership had long-term impacts on the unit, the Air Force and the mission.

Army Brigadier General Scott F. Donahue

Brigadier General (BG) Scott F. Donahue displayed passive toxic characteristics when he was placed in command of a failing unit in 2009. The South Pacific Division (SPD) of US Army Corps of Engineering (USACE) "was the worst of nine Divisions in USACE and had

experienced significant leadership turbulence.”³⁴ BG Donahue elected to repair SPD through more stringent standards, efficiency and accountability through “impassioned servant leadership.”³⁵ BG Donahue displayed passive toxic leadership characteristics through selfish respect for his authority and interests of recovering a failed unit. Direct references were made to his unapproachable style and authoritarian methods which placed emphasis in the workplace on surviving his personality rather than accomplishing the mission. BG Donahue failed to apply discipline, electing to keep personnel he felt were damaging to the organization. His own testimony identified individuals who he felt were actively toxic supervisors,³⁶ yet BG Donahue employed a method of rank and authoritarian work ethic rather than disciplining the individuals. As a result of his passive toxic leadership, the poor mission accomplishment and command climate came to light in a unit survey and a follow-on command directed investigation.

Army National Guard Brigadier General Eugene L. Mascolo

Brigadier General Eugene L. Mascolo provides an example of aggressive toxic leadership in a hectic, nearly combat, environment. The Inspector General found that he led through intimidation and fear³⁷ while improving the performance of a unit.³⁸ As the Director, Joint Staff Headquarters for Connecticut National Guard, BG Mascolo was responsible for coordinating Defense Support to Civil Authorities (DSCA) to include disaster and significant weather response. There was perceived enhanced performance of the Joint Operations Center (JOC) as a result of incredible amounts of micromanagement and verbal threats.³⁹ Emotional interaction resulted in many JOC members requesting alternative shifts and not wanting to work with or for BG Mascolo.⁴⁰ Initial complaints during Hurricane Irene were that the JOC was not providing accurate information. Individuals were working to survive the environment rather than pass

actionable information.⁴¹ The aggressive toxic leadership delayed information, rather than focusing effort, potentially hurting mission accomplishment.

Army Senior Executive Service Joyce Morrow

Senior Executive Service (SES) Ms. Joyce Morrow displayed passive and some aggressive toxic leadership traits as Administrative Assistant to the Secretary of the Army (AASA). The DoD IG found that she failed to foster a healthy organizational climate. Although she provided high-quality work products, they were accomplished at the sacrifice of her people.⁴² Her passive toxicity was highlighted through unpredictability, often cancelling subordinates leave, resulting in lost leave at the fiscal year turnover. Ms. Morrow requested her staff to perform unofficial errands for her, with the underling understanding that this was a directed task.⁴³ Her aggressive toxic environment came to light as a result of an official complaint regarding her continual negative comments about subordinates to other subordinates, using words such as “incompetent,” “stupid” or “lazy.”⁴⁴ Although she was known for high-quality work products, her office suffered from high turnover and disruption due to distraction.⁴⁵ She had nine executive officers over a two year period.⁴⁶ The lack of continuity required additional man-hours to be spent on ensuring accuracy and effective information flow. Long term impacts included personnel retention in the Army and ill will as one person elected to not have a retirement ceremony due to the toxicity of Ms. Morrow.⁴⁷

Combined Observable Conditions and Focus Group Considerations

From these investigations, reoccurring conditions of passive and aggressive toxic behaviors highlight observable traits. The focus group reviewed the traits and included some

they have encountered in their career. These traits are not all demonstrated by toxic leaders. The focus group and the investigations show that a number of the traits, repetitively observed should require higher leadership to investigate a toxic command climate. This list includes the interpersonal traits of an aggressive toxic leader and the conditional impacts of a passive toxic leader from a subordinate, peer and supervisory perspective (Figures 1, 2 and 3).

Traits From a Subordinate Perspective	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cursing or losing temper directed at subordinates in public and private • Observing people leave the leader's presence in an emotional state (have been crying) • Physical aggression towards individuals or objects • High subordinate turnover without operational reason • Concerns with providing feedback or negative information to the leader • Confusion on agendas or unpredictable schedule or meeting length • Concerns of retribution for taking mission or unit information up the chain of command • Subordinates doing personal errands for the supervisor out of fear of repercussion • Receiving negative comments about other 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> subordinates from the leader • Personnel electing to exclude leaders from significant ceremonies (retirement / farewells) • Multiple people working same tasks (directed duplication / competition of effort) • Filtering work through a person in the office that can present it to the supervisor with minimum friction due to their personal relationship with the supervisor • Leave cancelled or denied without an operational or higher command echelon requirement • Mission, exercise or inspection requirements well beyond and above what unit was prepared for • Employees personally purchasing resources out of fear of requesting them

Figure 1. Observed Department of Defense investigation traits from a subordinate perspective.

Traits From a Peer Perspective

- Discussions of turnover, requests for replacement of key personnel in office
- Constantly changing their office staff
- Speaking negatively or derogatorily of staff or subordinate support
- Holding long meetings at late, odd or during normally "non-duty" hours
- Discussing how members of their subordinate staff or chain of command are colluding to discredit their efforts.
- Problematic ideas that will help their unit/command at the expense of peer unit/commands
- Observing tirades/tantrums
- Failing to formally discipline subordinates
- Complaining about subordinates being sick or having family issues that keep them from being at work
- Subordinates not including the supervisor in their significant personal events (retirements, farewells, births, promotions)
- Overinflating subordinates' accomplishments for decoration or award purposes (focus group input)
- Public speaking or social media comments reflecting other toxic traits (focus group input)
- Failure to openly discuss or admit to unit failures among peers (not willing to debrief) (focus group input)

Figure 2. Observed Department of Defense investigation traits from a peer perspective.

Traits From a Supervisor Perspective

- High turnover in key front-office jobs
- Members with strong potential electing to retire or leave the military
- Formal feedback of subordinates not complete per performance reporting direction
- Unit showing large losses due to fiscal year leave rollover without operational reason
- Multiple leave cancellations or denials within unit without operational reason
- Tension between their unit and other units/commands
- Lack of disciplinary actions/manning changes in a unit that was performing poorly
- Requests for civilian overtime without operational justification
- Witnessing or overhearing emotional interaction with subordinates
- Subordinates not including the supervisor in their significant personal events (retirements, farewells, births, promotions)
- Overinflating subordinates' accomplishments for decoration or award purposes (focus group input)
- Public speaking or social media comments reflecting other toxic traits (focus group input)
- Failing to formally discipline subordinates
- Direct contact from concerned subordinates or peers
- Work discipline/ethic problems in unit (flight discipline was example provided) (focus group input)
- Failure to openly discuss or admit to unit failures among peers (not willing to debrief) (focus group input)
- Failed mission, exercise, inspection

Figure 3. Observed Department of Defense investigation traits from a supervisor perspective.

Focus group input shaped and added characteristics that were not included in the case studies (noted in the lists).⁴⁸ Multiple focus group members mentioned social media and impromptu public speaking as potential situations for toxic indicators. These venues do not have the normal filtering of formal military situations. Observable traits, such as jokingly speaking negatively about subordinates, may present themselves. From a peer and supervisor perspective, focus group members experienced toxic leaders who refused to share their missteps with or requests for advice from peers and superiors. The comments showed that these toxic leaders would blame previous leaders or subordinates rather than show weakness. In the same vein, these leaders would not accept feedback from their peers on events that would impact all the units within a command. Unit and member awards within the greater unit drove a discussion of excessive self-promotion. Leaders would over-inflate their unit's *personnel* accomplishments to increase their appearance of mission accomplishment. This was visible by subordinates who questioned improper recognition and by superiors that were aware of who should have been receiving accolades in subordinate commands versus those who did. A focus group concern regarding the traits was the context and content of leadership when determining toxicity.

The focus group unanimously emphasized that the traits by themselves do not form an equation of toxicity. Some of the traits described may be demonstrated by perfectly competent leaders expressing frustration, pressure and the difficulties of leadership under the mission they are assigned. Additionally, the expression of some of the traits of aggressive toxic leadership or metrics of passive toxic leadership may indicate a leader that needs instruction transitioning out of inept leadership. The focus group discussion highlighted the use of trending multiple indications to initiate deeper investigation into the leadership style and climate in a unit. The list of traits presents the spectrum of directly observed aggressive toxic leadership (emotional

displays) and metrically captured passive (employee overtime, retention) toxic leadership potential indicators. The answer to our second research question is yes, there are characteristics that can be distinctly observed that point to toxic leadership. Combining these traits (metrics and direct observations) with the focus group concerns of context help to provide recommendations for avoiding toxic leadership.

Recommendations

The answer to the final research question is a recommendation on how to appropriately provide leaders awareness of toxicity in their organizations. To avoid toxic people from being afforded the authority to lead toxically, there must be avenues that collect and coherently displays the propensity of the traits that have been developed from all three perspectives – subordinate, peer and supervisor. Two methods should identify a toxic leader before they can be placed in significant leadership positions or determine if they become toxic while leading. First, a modified 360-Degree Assessment should be completed on those who are being considered for significant leadership positions. The assessment should specify immediate subordinates, peers and supervisors as primary respondents. Second, while in leadership, an improved unit climate survey with questions and aggregated metrics that directly apply the previously determined traits should be completed to identify toxic or inept leadership of an organization. These methods may identify persons in the chain of command before they can poison a unit, determine if a leader is toxic before they fail the mission and provide a complete understanding of a unit command climate to superiors. Before discussing the specific recommendations, it is important to address focus group's concern of seeing these traits in the proper context of military leadership. Implementation will require some further study to ensure that minute indications of the

developed traits do not become an index of toxicity ignorant of the context in which they may have been displayed.

Implementation

The difficulty in providing metrics of toxicity is the context of the organization's mission. To properly use these assessments, normalization of data and application of threshold will reduce false-positive toxic labels. If military members strive to avoid all the toxic indicators and risk, military units could end up with politicians rather than effective leaders at the helm. Implementation of these assessment tools requires further study in order to establish a baseline of the density of toxic indicators across sub-cultures or Air Force Specialty Codes (job types). This would allow some context for potential outliers in the indicators. To keep leaders from gaming the system, further study is also required to determine appropriate data masking in order to avoid falsely shaping behaviors which solely work towards minimizing toxic indicators. If indicators do not meet the baselined threshold, that data is masked to avoid witchhunts or low context information judgements of subordinate commanders or command candidates. As a reminder, the label of "toxic leader" would show a preponderance of indicators that have spiked above a normalized threshold. This would then be used by commanders to determine if further study of that individual is necessary. The first step of potential to be a leader in significant organizations should be through a 360-Degree Assessment.

360-Degree Assessment

The 360-Degree Assessment (360) is a tool that provides feedback to a subject from their subordinates, peers and supervisors.⁴⁹ Portions of this survey are anonymous while others are

based on a sample of people from a population provided by the subject. A RAND Corporation study on the 360 determined that they should not be used for evaluations, but would be appropriate for career development in leadership positions.⁵⁰ This tool could be focused at specific moments in a subject's career to help determine command or senior non-commissioned leadership compatibility. The focus group agreed that the 360 is a good tool but would require direction both in selection of 360 feedback members' participation and of the types of interview questions.⁵¹ The Air Force currently has a service-wide boarding process to determine if members are eligible for unit command. The current nomination process is based on previous accomplishments and the narrow evaluation from one or two supervisors of a potential command candidate. The application for this board should include a 360 assessment with feedback members selected from current peers, subordinates and supervisors of the leadership candidate. The questions of the feedback should include the observable traits. If the 360 shows responses below a determined toxic threshold, the individual would be nominated to compete for command. The same board selection and 360 process should apply to significant non-commissioned officer positions. This does not merely apply to the first significant leadership position a person may take, but would be a process for all significant officer, enlisted and civilian leadership positions.

There are several junctions where a 360 evaluation of a leader should occur in their career. As an individual increases in rank, their responsibility and impact also increase, thus increasing the potential to abuse power and subordinates. Continuation of the 360 assessments as a leader's career progresses aids both the entire organization and helps that individual to understand where they may need mentoring. Further study on which levels or positions of leadership to assess will need to be conducted. Initial recommendations begin for the Air Force

at squadron level and each significant distinct organization (unit) above that. The next tool aids in determining if a person is developing toxic tendencies while in a leadership position.

Unit Climate Survey

The Military Equal Opportunity Unit Climate Assessment Program is directed by Department of Defense Directive 1350.2 Change 2, 8 June 2015. The assessment is designed to determine the “‘health’ and functioning effectiveness of an organization by examining such factors as morale, teamwork, and communication.”⁵² The current survey provided to a unit is voluntary and includes generic questions about resources, supervision and workplace climate.⁵³ Example questions require responses of levels of agreement or disagreement with statements such as:⁵⁴

I am provided the resources I need to do my job effectively.

My commander presents himself/herself as a competent leader.

My commander takes steps to ensure I am treated with respect.

I can raise concerns about issues that affect my job without fear of reprisal.

These may indicate trend issues within the climate of a unit. If questions specified direct observance of the observable traits from the subordinate perspective and the person who displayed them, superiors would be able to determine where toxic versus inept leadership exists throughout a unit. These “opinion polls” can be combined with empirical data, which is not currently part of the survey results, to be presented to a superior.

Measured data includes those metrics that are not well packaged for a superior to see. The observable traits highlight items such as personnel turnover, retention and leave. These metrics for an organization should become part of the unit climate survey. If they indicate a

deviance from the average without a specific or operational reason, further scrutiny can be applied. Some of this data will have to be part of the climate survey questions since leave may be denied verbally by a commander before it is entered in a system of record. An example question would be “how many times have you been denied leave that was not coincident with an operational requirement (exercise, inspection or combat deployment).” When correctly packaged (metrics and density of the observed traits) a superior command has a complete picture of an organizational climate and can determine if the culture is influenced by a lack of resources, inept or toxic leadership. Thus the final question is answered: A modified 360-Degree Assessment and unit climate survey program provides objective and subjective access to the observable traits to make supervisors aware of potential toxic leadership.

Conclusion

Through a case study of toxic military leaders and discussion aided by a focus group with over 183 years of experience, three research questions have been addressed. There are differences between aggressive and passive toxic leadership. Although these differences mostly lie in the transparency of toxicity, the impacts and intentions of both aggressive and passive leaders remain the same. There are observable, measurable and reportable events that indicate aggressive and passive toxic leadership. These events or traits may be observed from the subordinate, peer and supervisory levels. Finally, a modification of the current 360-Degree Assessment and unit climate survey programs can provide access to the observable traits for the supervisors’ awareness of potential toxic leadership. Thus, through a qualitative approach, toxic leadership, both “aggressive” and “passive” in nature, in the United States military can be identified through specific, observable events before a unit suffers from significant mission

failure, becomes destroyed or personnel are permanently damaged. There are some concerns and requirements for further study with the implementation of these tools.

As discussed, the implementation of these recommendations requires further study to ensure the promotion of leaders that are dedicated to mission accomplishment, not solely “passing” the toxicity test. With regard to the toxic traits, two key areas requiring further study include the density of their observance and the presentation of the data to superiors. A larger leadership focus group, with greater breadth, may help determine how much of the 360 and climate survey data is presented and how far beyond the subject’s immediate supervisor it should travel. The second area of further study includes determining which leadership positions would require completion of a 360 Degree Assessment for a candidate. This research, through the three research questions, has successfully bridged the gap from generic labels of toxic leadership to observable traits. This research includes determining who will see the traits and the tools to provide this data to the people who can fix a problem. Further research into the details of implementation will enable mentoring inept potential leaders and exposing the toxic leaders whose units will need significant effort to recover.

Notes

¹ Toxic Leadership Focus Group: Major Mark General Kelly, Col USAF (ret) Stephen Platt, Col USAF (ret) Shane Riza, Col USAF (ret) Trey Fuller, Col USAF (ret) Brian Vaughn, Col USAF (ret) Jon Hanna, Col USAF (ret) Name withheld from publication. Two objective questionnaires were completed by each member individually. The first questionnaire dealt with the character, impacts and prevalence of toxic leadership. The second questionnaire discussed individual toxic traits, findings from the investigation case studies and ways the Air Force could aid in the discovery of toxic leadership. Follow-up questions and discussions with individual members helped specify discussion points.

² George E. Reed, George E. Reed, *Tarnished Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2015), 11.

³ George E. Reed, George E. Reed, *Tarnished Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2015), 10.

⁴ James M. Dobbs, *The Relationship Between Perceived Toxic Leadership Styles, Leader Effectiveness, and Organizational Cynicism* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2013), 15.

⁵ Merriam-Webster, "Definition of Toxic," Merriam-Webster.com, 20 Nov 2015, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/toxics>.

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⁷ Toxic Leadership Focus Group.

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¹⁰ Toxic Leadership Focus Group.

¹¹ Toxic Leadership Focus Group.

¹² George E. Reed, George E. Reed, *Tarnished Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2015), 15.

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¹⁵ Toxic Leadership Focus Group.

¹⁶ James M. Dobbs, *The Relationship Between Perceived Toxic Leadership Styles, Leader Effectiveness, and Organizational Cynicism* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2013), 13.

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²⁰ ²⁰ George E. Reed, George E. Reed, *Tarnished Toxic Leadership in the U.S. Military* (Lincoln: Potomac Books, 2015), 14.

²¹ Marcia Lynn Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* (Westport: Quorum Books, 1996), 145.

- ²² Marcia Lynn Whicker, *Toxic Leaders: When Organizations Go Bad* (Westport: Quorum Books, 1996), 10.
- ²³ Toxic Leadership Focus Group.
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- ²⁵ James M. Dobbs, *The Relationship Between Perceived Toxic Leadership Styles, Leader Effectiveness, and Organizational Cynicism* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2013), 15.
- ²⁶ Toxic Leadership Focus Group.
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- ²⁹ James M. Dobbs, *The Relationship Between Perceived Toxic Leadership Styles, Leader Effectiveness, and Organizational Cynicism* (Ann Arbor: ProQuest, 2013), 15.
- ³⁰ The Inspector General of the Air Force, *FOIA Released Report of Investigation (S7033P) Maj Gen Stephen D. Schmidt (Redacted)*, (Washington, DC: Department of The Air Force, March 2013), 5, 8.
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- ³³ The Inspector General of the Air Force, *FOIA Released Report of Investigation (S7033P) Maj Gen Stephen D. Schmidt (Redacted)*, (Washington, DC: Department of The Air Force, March 2013), 4.
- ³⁴ U.S. Army Inspector General Agency, *FOIA Released Report of investigation (Case 10-028) of Brigadier General Scott F. Donahue (Redacted)*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army Feb 2011), 1.
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- ⁴⁴ U.S. Army Inspector General Agency, *FOIA Released Report of investigation (Case 12-006) of Joyce Morrow, Senior Executive Services (Redacted)*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army Feb 2013), 7, 9.

⁴⁵ U.S. Army Inspector General Agency, *FOIA Released Report of investigation (Case 12-006) of Joyce Morrow, Senior Executive Services (Redacted)*, (Washington, DC: Department of the Army Feb 2013), 6.

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⁴⁸ Toxic Leadership Focus Group.

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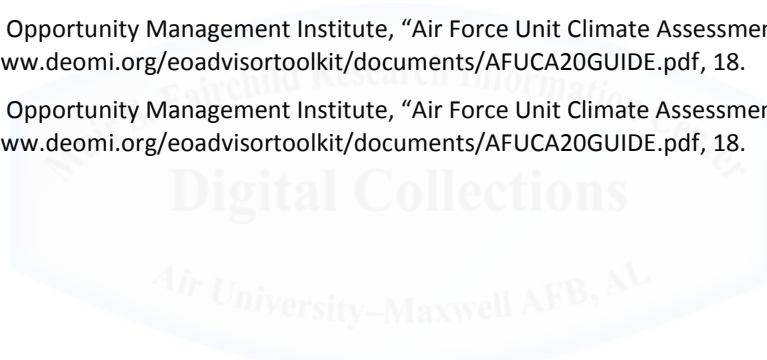
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⁵² Department of Defense Directive 1350.2 Incorporating Change 2, *Department of Defense Military Equal Opportunity (MEO) Program*, 8 June 2015, Enclosure 2, 16

⁵³ Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, "Air Force Unit Climate Assessment Guide," deomi.org, 1 Dec 2015, <https://www.deomi.org/eoadvisortoolkit/documents/AFUCA20GUIDE.pdf>, 18.

⁵⁴ Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute, "Air Force Unit Climate Assessment Guide," deomi.org, 1 Dec 2015, <https://www.deomi.org/eoadvisortoolkit/documents/AFUCA20GUIDE.pdf>, 18.



APPENDIX 1

Focus Group Interview Questionnaires

Toxic Leadership Focus Group: Major Mark General Kelly, Col USAF (ret) Stephen Platt, Col USAF (ret) Shane Riza, Col USAF (ret) Trey Fuller, Col USAF (ret) Brian Vaughn, Col USAF (ret) Jon Hanna, and Col USAF (ret) Name withheld from publication. All of the retired officers left service in the 2014-2015 timeframe. Two objective questionnaires were completed by each member individually. The first questionnaire dealt with the character, impacts and prevalence of toxic leadership. The second questionnaire discussed individual toxic traits, findings from the investigation case studies and ways the Air Force could aid in the discovery of toxic leadership. Follow-up questions and discussions with individual members helped specify discussion points. The interview and follow-up questions occurred on various dates through email and individual conversations beginning on 1 October, 2015 through 5 January, 2016.

Interview Questionnaire 1:

Thank you for your participation. This a subjective discussion. These initial question will help frame some back-and-forth discussion. Please answer in this file and send back to my military Email ([c](#)). There no limit to the length of your answer.

Please identify individuals by position, not by name.

- 1) How many years have you been an Officer in the military?
- 2) How many assignments have you held a G-series Command Position?
- 3) Please define "Toxic Leadership" in your own words:
- 4) Have you ever experienced a toxic supervisor or peer (your definition)?

What made it toxic?

Did their superior know about their toxicity?

Did he/she ever receive feedback or punitive actions for the situation(s)
What was their response?
Did the unit recover?
Was there a specified plan for the recovery?

- 5) Have you even had a Toxic subordinate (your definition)?
- 6) Comments/opinions/anecdotes on the issue?

Interview Questionnaire 2:

Thank you for your participation. Your initial answers have been compared to other respondents. Please answer in this file and send back to my military Email (Michael.boger@us.af.mil). There no limit to the length of your answer.

Please identify any individuals by position, not by name.

Most of my questionnaire responses regarding experience with toxic leadership in the Air Force centered around narcissistic indicators: Leaders caring more about their boss's view of their performance than the long-term unit mission effectiveness and people. The observable characteristics fell in the "jerk" category which were perceptible by subordinates, potentially peers, but not supervisors.

I accomplished a case study of four FOIA released Department of Defense Inspector General investigations of senior toxic leaders to develop observable characteristics by subordinates, peers and superiors. These leaders and their investigations were labeled as toxic due to the common themes of maltreatment, unhealthy command climate, and failure to treat subordinates with dignity and respect resulting in mission degradation or failure. These address narcissistic or "aggressive" toxic behaviors.

Please comment on these indicators from a peer, supervisor and subordinate perspective. If they spark additional points, please include them. As before, the structure is for your senior leader input, recommendation or concerns, not a statistical analysis.

Indications observable by peers (similar rank, and not in supervisory chain of evaluation/tasking):

- Excessive comments about leadership perception of their performance vs real concern of their mission accomplishment
- Resource sharing within the parent unit: overly prioritizing their unit's hardships vs parent unit mission accomplishment
- Concern about their unit awards/recognition and leadership's perception of them as a result
- Unwilling to share lesson's learned/mistakes truthfully to include
 - Their missteps
 - Requests for advice from peers
- Speaking poorly of parent unit leadership in social settings
- Speaking poorly of their unit's subordinate leaders (Flight Commanders, NCOICs, etc) in social settings

- 1) Comments/Additions?
- 2) A “360 Degree Review” involves inputs from the peers, subordinates and potentially previous supervisors. If you were selected as a respondent in a “360 Degree Review” about a peer who displayed these or other observable characteristics you have identified, would you feel comfortable mentioning it? What would cause concern?
- 3) Would you address directly with the peer any of these issues?
- 4) Please describe/discuss any experience you have had with peers that may have displayed these characteristics?

Indications observable by superiors:

- High turnover of supervisors or office staff within their unit
- Subordinates not including them in significant events (retirements, promotions, pin-ons)
- Excessive “use or lose” leave in the unit without an operational reason
- Repeated denied/cancelled leave of subordinates (not an indicator currently provided to superiors)
- Poor personnel retention compared to similar units/AFSCs
- Social media or public speaking missteps
 - o “Jokingly” harassing individuals in unit
 - o Excessive talk about their own accolades
 - o Misrepresentation of facts

- 5) Comments/Additions?
- 6) Do you think you have had the proper visibility on these indicators in the past?
- 7) What amount or density of these characteristics would cause you to take action as their commander?

Indications observable by subordinates:

- Excessive long office/duty hours/shifts on a re-occurring basis
- Unplanned work during normally “off duty” timeframes without an operational requirement
- Denial of leave
- Low knowledge of immediate subordinates’ backgrounds, interests, concerns or future plans
- Reacting aggressively to mistakes of subordinates
- Tirades or losing temper on a regular basis in private and unit leadership level (staff) meetings
- Cursing *at* individuals, about their work product or their abilities
- Reacting physically *towards* subordinates (not making contact)
 - o Shoving papers off desk
 - o Throwing papers, files towards subordinates

- Repeatedly emotional subordinates exiting their office/duty sections after interacting with them
- 8) Comments/Additions?
 - 9) When is cursing or loss of temper effective for leading?
 - 10) Do current unit climate assessments have the proper information or questions to indicate toxic leader situations?

“Passive Toxicity”: Some survey respondents addressed the toxic leader that, although narcissistic, displayed toxicity though **lack of action or proactivity due to their entrenched self-interests**. Some responses suggest the only method to identify these leaders is through failing exercises, inspections or during mission execution.

- 11) Do any of the discussed observable characteristics identify “passively toxic” leaders?



APPENDIX 2

Case Study Lists

Air Force Major General Stephen D. Schmidt

The following are traits from the MG Schmidt report that were repeatedly observed in MG Schmidt's command:

Perspective of the Subordinates

- Cursing directed at subordinates in public and private
- Yelling about performance of subordinates in public and private
- Observing people leave the office in emotional state (have been crying)
- Throwing or ripping papers in anger
- Repeated turnover of positions in the office

Perspectives of Peers

- Discussions of turnover, requests for replacement of key personnel in office
- Changing office staff
- Speaking negatively of staff or subordinate support; calling them timid, weak, sensitive.

Perspectives of Superiors

- High turnover in key front-office jobs
- Members with strong potential electing to retire
- Formal feedback of subordinates not complete per performance reporting direction
- Unit showing large losses due to fiscal year leave rollover

- Multiple leave cancellations or denials within unit

Army Brigadier General Scott F. Donahue

The following are traits from the BG Donahue report that were repeatedly observed in BG Donahue's command:

Perspective of the Subordinates

- Unapproachable, not responding to feedback or willingness to speak privately
- Yelling about performance of subordinates in public and private
- Observing people leave the office in emotional state (have been crying)
- Excessively long meetings
- Volunteering for assignments to get away from unit
- Unpredictable schedule
- Sense of tension in the office

Perspectives of Peers

- Holding long meetings at late, odd or during normally "non-duty" hours
- Paranoia: Discussing how members of their subordinate staff and up the chain of command are colluding to discredit their efforts.
- Problematic ideas that will help their unit/command at the expense of peer unit/commands
- Complaints about poorly performing subordinates

Perspectives of Superiors

- Tension between their unit and other units/commands
- Lack of disciplinary actions/manning changes in a unit that was performing poorly
- Excessive requests for civilian overtime

Army National Guard Brigadier General Eugene L. Mascolo

The following are traits from the BG Mascolo report that were repeatedly observed in BG Mascolo's command:

Perspective of the Subordinates

- Guidance for meetings not matching expectations for presentation/information
- Paranoia of subordinates coordinating up the chain of command
- Cursing directed at subordinates in public and private
- Yelling about performance of subordinates in public and private
- Observing people leave the office in emotional state (have been crying)
- Not willing to give bad news to him
- Statements regarding subordinates generating embarrassment (for the toxic leader)
- Fellow subordinates requesting opposing work shifts

Perspectives of Peers

- Overhearing tirades/tantrums

- People requesting to be on opposite shifts
- Emotional reaction to people providing information (which they cannot control fidelity of)
- Labelling critical personnel as ineffective, but keeping them on team
- Calling subordinates by derogatory pet names (“knucklehead” or “nimrod”)

Perspectives of Superiors

- Personnel requests for re-assignment in other locations
- Witnessing or overhearing a tirade/tantrum
- Direct contact from concerned subordinates

Army Senior Executive Service Joyce Morrow

The following are traits from the SES Ms. Morrow report that were repeatedly observed under Ms. Morrow’s supervision:

Perspective of the Subordinates

- Subordinates doing personal errands for the supervisor out of fear of repercussion
- Receiving negative comments about other subordinates
- Personnel electing to forgo significant ceremonies (retirement / farewells)
- Multiple people working same task with same due-outs (directed duplication / competition of effort)
- Filtering work through a person in the office that can present it to the supervisor with minimum friction due to their personal relationship with the supervisor

- Awkward body language or “silent treatment” from supervisor

Perspectives of Peers

- Speaking negatively about subordinates
- Excessive late hours or office working on non-duty days
- Complaining about subordinates being sick or having family issues that keep them from being at work
- Subordinates not including the supervisor in their significant personal events (retirements, farewells, births)

Perspectives of Superiors

- Personnel requests for re-assignment in other locations
- High turnover
- Unit showing large losses of leave days due to fiscal year leave rollover
- Multiple leave cancellations or denials within unit
- Subordinates not including the supervisor in their significant personal events (retirements, farewells, births)
- Personnel openly refusing to work with them

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